

# Incorporating Media Literacy in the English Classroom

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In 1970, the National Council for Teachers of English passed a resolution recommending that teachers incorporate “non-print texts” into their instruction. Now, 35 years later, many teachers admit struggling to include “the media” in their lesson plans, despite revised standards and textbooks, that include it.

In 1999, this author partnered with Rutgers University Mass Communications Professor Robert Kubey and published a study in which elements of media literacy were found in almost every state’s English Language Arts teaching standards. In Florida, it includes:

**Language Standard 2:** The student understands the power of language.

**Language Standard 4:** The student understands how the multiple media tools of graphics, pictures, color, motion, and music can enhance communication in television, film, radio and advertising.

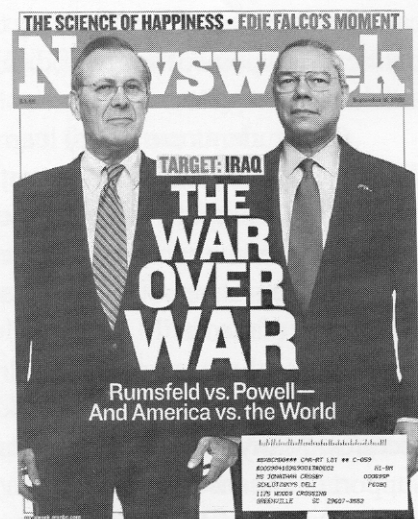
**Language Standard 6:** The student understands specific ways that mass media can potentially enhance or manipulate information.

Having worked in public education in Florida (Orange County Public Schools: 1987–1998), I set out to elevate the importance of media literacy in Florida and eventually across the United States. The publication of the standards study allowed K–12 educators everywhere to realize that “media literacy” had finally been recognized. But having “media literacy” included in teaching standards does not mean that it is taught: teachers need training and they need resources.

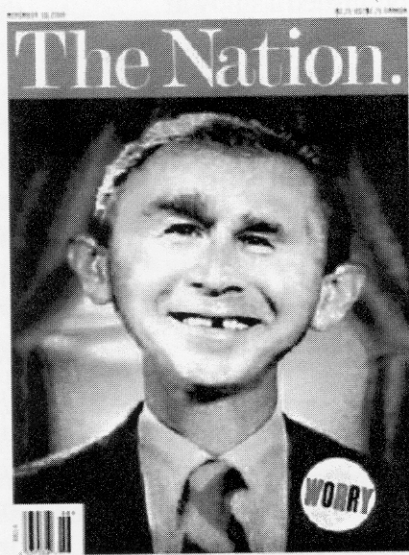
While in Orlando, I partnered with both Time Warner Cable and *The Orlando Sentinel* to provide staff development workshops for English and Social Studies teachers, as well as school library media specialists.

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Upon returning to my home state of South Carolina, I created the Media Literacy Clearinghouse Web site, <http://medialit.med.sc.edu> as a resource for educators who may not know what media literacy is, but wanted to try to introduce it in their classrooms. For teachers who are overwhelmed already, my first recommendation in approaching media literacy education is to start slowly. Pick up a magazine and use the cover images as a starting point for discussion. Here is an example from my collection:



I first ask participants in my workshop this question: How many of you believe that the two men pictured on the cover (Rumsfeld and Powell) were photographed standing next to each other? No one believes this. So next, I ask what clues in the cover image lead them to believe that they were not photographed standing next to each other. After a short discussion, I tell them that in the magazine's Table of Contents where you would find the credit for the cover photographer, it says, "cover photos by..." Here is another example:



Here is the actual cover from *The Nation* magazine shortly after the 2000 election. First, we can discuss parody by asking students "who is parodied here" (many may not recognize the cover as a morphed image of *MAD* magazine's Alfred E. Newman). Secondly we can discuss bias: just by analyzing the cover image we can tell the political viewpoint of this periodical, without ever having read any of its articles.

Our students are visual learners. I think we can all agree on that. They spent an enormous amount of time in front of the screens (television, movie, computer, video game, cell phone). After all of this exposure, they become accustomed to learning from the visual media, yet many teachers have not been trained nor do they fully understand the "languages of media."

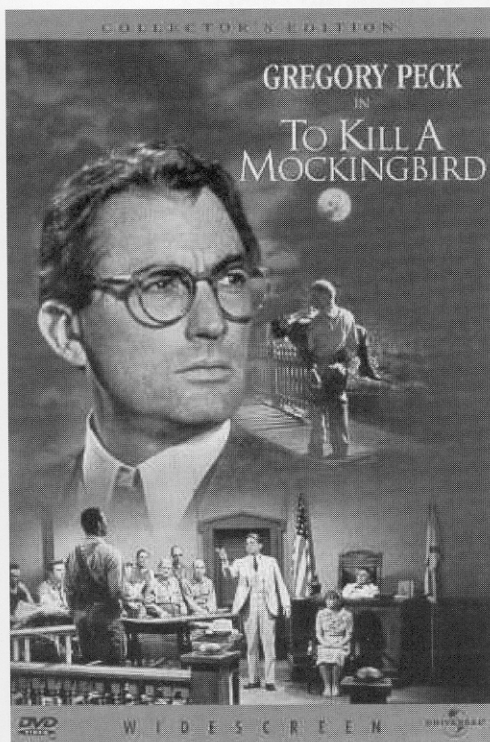
One of these languages is film. Students are avid film fans. They spend many hours, mostly on weekends, taking in the latest motion pictures. Many teachers use popular film in the classroom, primarily to support or enhance the companion reading of a print text.

On my Web site, I have developed a film study guide to the classic 1963 *To Kill A Mockingbird* (<http://medialit.med.sc.edu/tkam1.htm>). I am also utilizing the film on DVD, which allows the teacher to seamlessly move from one scene to another, or to pause in

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order to study the composition of a frame. The novel and film are ripe for exploring symbolism. Take the opening credits for example. In the opening, the hand of Scout is seen opening a cigar box and playing with a number of objects, all of which serve as symbols for what happens in the film.



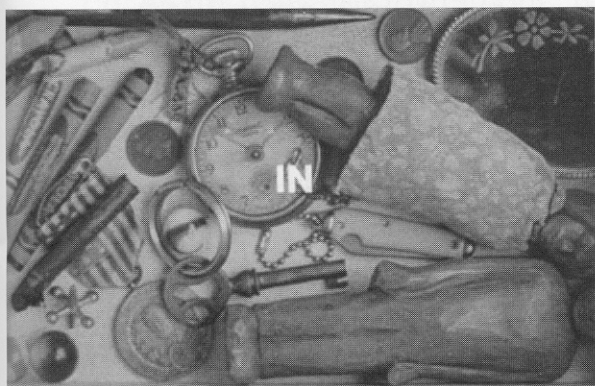
By simply using the opening credits from the film, we can ask students to choose one of the objects (e.g., the pocket watch, the marbles, the dolls) and to write an essay to include a description of the scene in which the symbol is found and what that symbol might represent. (I selected the pocket watch from the opening scene, after which I immediately jump to the scene in which Scout is reading in bed with Atticus listening. After reading, she asks what time it is and her father pulls out his pocket watch.)



Teachers might also consider having their students write a “movie review.” The review might be for a current release or one being used in the classroom. Whatever the case, students should be exposed to many different types of reviews, so that they are comfortable with the elements of a review.

I contend the writing process is critical, especially in media. Most media start out as print texts. I worked in television news as a news producer. My responsibility was to organize the daily newscast in some logical order and to write lead-ins for the anchor people to read. Much of my time was spent writing on deadlines.

Advertising, whether it is for print, radio, or television also involves writing. Ad copywriters put their ideas on paper, develop corresponding storyboards, and sell those to the client. Studying the various techniques of persuasion, whether it be in a political campaign commercial, or the latest car ad, is a perfect way to excite students about media.



Teachers can help their students become more “media literate” by teaching them the core concepts of media literacy (as developed and promoted by The Center for Media Literacy, [www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org)):

- All media messages are constructed.
- Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.
- Different people experience the same media message differently.
- Media have embedded values and points-of-view.
- Most media messages are constructed to gain profit and/or power.

Correspondingly, The Center for Media Literacy promotes a set of critical thinking questions that align to the core concepts listed above. Among the questions students can begin to ask of media messages are:

- Who produced the message, who or what might be omitted?
- What techniques are used to attract my attention, making a message believable?
- How do you know what it means; does the message fit your prior knowledge and understanding?
- What values, ideals, lifestyles are promoted?
- Who stands to benefit from the message being told in this way?

In conclusion, the world of media and visual images is the world our students are increasingly exposed to and what they pay attention to. It is past time that teachers consider the role of media and media literacy in their classrooms. The employers of the future are demanding it of their prospective workers:

“Economic forecasters and business analysts are predicting that jobs in the 21st century will require information processing skills. Within school systems, this means that the standard three R’s—reading, writing and ‘rithmetic—are being greatly expanded. A multitude of literacy connotations now exist: visual literacy, media literacy, textual literacy, numerical literacy, technology literacy, and network literacy. In each case...the word ‘literacy’ suggest[s] a complex of skills, including analysis, evaluation, synthesis, and application. Merely teaching reading and writing is no longer sufficient....”

#### References:

State Standards Study ( <http://medialit.med.sc.edu/statelit.htm>)

*Newsweek* cover (copyright 2002 *Newsweek* Magazine)

*The Nation* cover ( <http://www.thenation.com>)

TKAM DVD cover (author’s personal collection)

TKAM credit scene (copyright 1962 Pakula-Mulligan Productions Inc. & Brentwood Productions Inc.)

Final quote: “Contemporary Literacy: Essential Skills for the 21st Century”

(author Janet Murray, *MultiMedia Schools* Magazine, March/April 2003, p. 18)